

# Six Encounters with Lincoln: A President Confronts Democracy and Its Demons by Elizabeth Brown Pryor.

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## ***Six Encounters with Lincoln: A President Confronts Democracy and Its Demons* by Elizabeth Brown Pryor (review)**

Louise L. Stevenson

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

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*Louise L. Stevenson (bio)*

By now, readers of the books reviewed in this journal may be congratulating themselves that they have little more to learn about the sixteenth president of the United States and his administration. Abraham Lincoln's one hundredth birthday and the sesquicentennial of the Civil War opened the floodgates for Lincoln studies. The more notable among them offered new understandings of the Republican struggle against slavery, the president as military commander, his relationship with the press, and the reaction to his death. Scholars even expanded the geographic scope of Lincoln [End Page 141] and Civil War studies to place the president's republican beliefs and antislavery efforts within the context of the Atlantic world.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor's *Six Encounters with Lincoln* will jolt its readers from complacency. Based on exhaustive research in some 350 collections of family papers and diaries, plus visits to over fifty libraries and archives, her "six encounters" compellingly and gracefully open new perspectives on the Lincoln presidency. The author proposes that they all reveal the president as he struggled with the difficulties "of managing a republic and creating a presidency" (2)—in other words, as he contended with the demons inherent in governing a constitutional democracy.

In the first two chapters, Pryor addresses these concerns. In chapter 1, she draws on her two decades of employment in the State Department to argue that Lincoln's success in antebellum party politics mis-educated him for his role as commander in chief. He came to the White House unaware that the military functioned according to protocols of rank and hierarchy. This ignorance would produce the shambles of decision-making that preceded the re-provisioning of Fort Sumter in April 1861. Pryor's Lincoln stands in bold contrast to the Lincoln presented by James McPherson in *Tried by War: Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (2008).

Pryor next examines the totalitarian temptation of democratic government in wartime through an unexpected juxtaposition. Most historians explain Lincoln's affection for humorists such as David Ross Locke and Robert Henry Newell (a.k.a. Petroleum V. Nasby and Orpheus C. Kerr) by suggesting that their spoofs offered the president relief from wartime worries. Pryor uses Lincoln's taste for their writing to do more. She shows how they often rebuked him for military mismanagement and contested his administration's impinging on civil rights in wartime. Thus, the author applies a humorous coating to the story already established by Mark E. Neely Jr. in *The Fate of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties* (1991).

In the next three chapters, Pryor departs from the theme of totalitarian temptation as a democratic demon to explore how enslaved Americans, women, and Native Americans challenged an ideal of democracy. Unfortunately, the ideal of democracy against which Pryor measures Lincoln is one that belongs to our age rather than to his. One sees the discrepancy between democracy as Lincoln lived it and as Pryor imagines it when she says that his "long-term vision for Native Americans, freedmen, and women rarely extended further than the limited vista of the complacent masses" (260). Fortunately, for the preservation of the republic and the freedom of the enslaved peoples, those complacent masses voted for Lincoln. **[End Page 142]**

Setting aside Pryor's presentism, her chapters on Lincoln's engagement with Native Americans provide much new and intriguing information. While recent books such as John A. Haymond's excellent *The Infamous Dakota War Trials of 1862: Revenge, Military Law and the Judgment of History* (2016) analyze the Minnesota uprising and Lincoln's pardoning of all but 38 of the 303 Sioux condemned to death by military tribunal, no author has yet attempted to include the breadth of information that Pryor covers in this lengthy chapter. First, we learn that the Lincolns sometimes greeted Native Americans in the White House. For instance, Mary Lincoln invited a Seneca woman to sing at an 1861 reception. Most often, Native Americans came to the residence on official

could go in confrontations between nationals who legitimized their claims in shared republican terms" (193).

Taken together, the essays in this volume convincingly demonstrate that the nations and empires of the Americas shared common concerns, problems, and approaches during the 1860s. Readers will come away with an enhanced understanding of the geopolitics of the region during the Civil War era. That is not to say that the volume provides scholars with a comprehensive history of the 1860s. As in most edited collections of this nature, some of the essays advance Doyle's opening argument with greater clarity and originality than do others. Roughly half of the book's contents deal with Mexico and Cuba, while little attention is paid to Central America, northern South America, and the countries along the Pacific Coast.

That said, Doyle has compiled an inspiring resource for future scholarship. The essays in the book shed light on topics rarely considered by Civil War historians, and the collection introduces readers to several distinguished scholars whose work has only rarely been available in English. Chaz Yingling, who served as the conference's graduate assistant, also collated a very helpful online bibliography of relevant scholarship, which remains accessible by internet to future researchers. *American Civil Wars* will undoubtedly spark a wider-ranging conversation on the Western Hemisphere's "crisis of the 1860s."

*Andre M. Fleche*

ANDRE M. FLECHE is an associate professor of history at Castleton University and the author of *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

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